



The Birth and Re-birth of the ISBDs: Process and Procedures for Creating and Revising the International Standard Bibliographic Descriptions

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Before discussing the procedures by which the ISBDs are prepared and updated, let me provide some background information about this important IFLA initiative.'

The ISBDs date back to 1969, when the Committee on Cataloguing sponsored an International Meeting of Cataloguing Experts. This meeting produced a resolution which proposed creation of standards to regularize the form and content of bibliographic descriptions.

As a result, the Section on Cataloguing put into motion work which ultimately would provide the means for a considerable increase in the sharing and exchange of bibliographic data. This work resulted in the concept of the International Standard Bibliographic Description (ISBD), which has now endured for nearly 30 years. In the view of many bibliographic experts throughout the world, the birth and maturing of the ISBDs have proved to be IFLA's most successful effort at promoting the cause of cataloguing standardization. Indeed, one might venture the opinion that in the history of cataloguing no other standard has enjoyed such a high degree of acceptance as that accorded to the ISBD concept. The individual formats to which the ISBD concept have been applied are now used by bibliographic agencies, national and multinational cataloguing codes, and cataloguers throughout the world.

The first of the ISBDs to be published was the *International Standard Bibliographic Description for Monographic Publications (ISBD(M))*, which appeared in 1971. There have followed projects to produce ISBDs for Serials, Non-Book Materials, Cartographic Materials, Rare Books, Printed music, and, most recently Electronic Resources. For article level publications, *Guidelines for the application of the ISBDs to the description of component parts* was issued.

During the early years, especially in relationship to the first two ISBDs, that for monographs and that for serials, there was clearly lacking a consistent foundation for the program in terms of definition of data elements and specification of principles for bibliographic description across all formats. So, it developed that ISBD(S), for example, deviated from ISBD(M) in some basic ways; the most prominent difference was in their variant rules for recording titles and statements of authorship. As a result and to insure that the separate ISBDs would thereafter be harmonious in their treatment of data elements and prescribed punctuation, IFLA representatives met with the Joint Steering Committee for Revision of AACR (2) to prepare the ISBD(General). ISBD(G) has provided a framework to which all ISBDs have been made to conform ever since.

Next there followed what might be called "the first general review project". To conduct this project, an ISBD Review Committee was formed. It first met in August 1981 and has been in place to serve as the IFLA Cataloguing Section's Maintenance Agency ever since (although for a period of time its name was changed to the ISBD Maintenance Committee (or reasons which will be explained below), Ultimately it was renamed the ISBD Review Group.

There were three major objectives set out for the first general review project:

- (1) to harmonize provisions, achieving increased consistency;
- (2) to Improve examples; and
- (3) to make the provisions more applicable to cataloguers working with materials published in non-roman scripts.

In addition, two narrower objectives motivated this particular revision effort:

- (1) to review the use of the equals sign (as its use in bibliographic descriptions has been the source of some controversy); and,
- (2) to consider proposals regarding the ISBD for Non Book Materials emanating from specialist groups such as the International Association of Music Librarians (most prominent of which was to remove "machine-readable data files" as a format from this standard).

By the end of the decade, the ISBDs had been thoroughly considered, and they were republished in "Revised editions". In addition, a separate ISBD was created for machine-readable data files, which appeared in 1988 as the International Standard Bibliographic Description for Computer Files (ISBD(CF)). However, because of the rapid advancements in technology, the need for revision of this ISBD quickly arose, resulting in the publication of the ISBD for Electronic Resources (ISBD(ER)). In the early 1990s, the Cataloguing Section with the cooperation of the Section on Classification and Indexing set up a Study Group on the Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records (FRBR). One immediate consequence of this development was the decision to suspend most revision work on the ISBDs while the FRBR Group pursued its charge to "recommend a basic level of functionality and basic data requirements for records created by national bibliographic agencies." Also suspended to await the results of the FRBR study was a project then in progress to identify the components of a "Concise ISBD(M)" -that is, a standard setting out the minimal bibliographic features of an acceptable record. This project was put on hold because it was expected that FRBR's findings would in effect provide such a baseline. During this period, the ISBD Review Group became the ISBD Maintenance Group, a change of name reflecting a decision that it should deal only with ISBD problems that needed attention prior to issuance of the FRBR recommendations.

In 1998, the FRBR Study Group did publish its Final Report after its recommendations were approved by the IFLA Section on Cataloguing's Standing Committee. ² At that time the ISBD Review Group was reconstituted to resume its traditional work. As expected, Cataloguing's Standing Committee asked the ISBD Review Group to initiate a fullscale review of the ISBDs. The objective of this "second general review project" was to ensure conformity between the provisions of the ISBDs and FRBR's data requirements for the "basic level national bibliographic record."

In the ISBDs, national bibliographic agencies are called upon to "prepare the definitive description containing all the mandatory elements set out in the relevant ISBD insofar as the information is applicable to the publication being described." To facilitate implementation of this principle, the ISBDs designate as "optional" those data elements which are not mandatory when applicable; in the case of particular ISBDs, a review of the Outline (consistently provided in each standard at paragraph 0.3) will reveal which data elements are optional. Therefore, the main task in pursuing the second general review has entailed a close look at the ISBD data elements which are mandatory to make optional any which are optional in FRBR, (In no case is a data element mandatory in FRBR but optional in the ISBDs.)

The ISBD Review Group began by examining the *International Standard Bibliographic Description for Monographic Publications (ISBD(M))*, last revised in 1987. The changes which the Review Group proposed to make in the next iteration of this standard were posted on IFLANET. The availability of the proposal was widely announced on appropriate electronic discussion lists, and those with comments were asked to reply by July 15th. The Review Group considered suggestions received from several individuals, institutions, and cataloguing groups at its meeting held in conjunction with the August 2000 IFLA Conference. A draft revision has now been produced and will soon be posted to IFLANET.

In addition to this general review now underway, there are currently also underway special projects to revise the ISBD for Serials and the ISBD for Cartographic Materials. Although there are several goals being pursued, both projects are seeking to incorporate provisions to deal with electronic versions of publications within the scope of these two ISBDs. These two ISBDs will also need to incorporate the specifications for basic level national bibliographic records.

Thus, after 30 years, IFLA's ISBD program has yielded standards for representing bibliographic data for all types of library materials and maintained these standards through one or more revision processes. To make the ISBDs more readily available and to make them available at no cost, the ISBD Review Group has begun to convert the texts to machine-readable form for posting on IFLANET. Last year, ISBD(ER) was published electronically, and very shortly the ISBD for rare books and the General ISBD will be brought up on IFLANET. The Group is hoping that all the other ISBDs will be digitized and mounted later this year and next.

Meanwhile, the Review Group has asked the UBCIM Director to publicize an authoritative list of the "ISBD Family" on IFLANET, and this was accomplished in early 2000. (3) In addition, UBCIM is soliciting through its regional offices information regarding translations of the ISBDs for the purposes of identifying for the public definitive versions available in languages other than English. So far, information regarding Dutch, Finnish, French, Hungarian, Italian, Latvian, Macedonian, Slovak, Slovenian, and Spanish language translations has been provided and can be accessed through links on IFLANET. (4) Procedures are essential in all standardization work in order to ensure that the steps by which a document becomes a new or revised standard are well known and meticulously accomplished. The ISBDs are no exception to this rule. As a result, at the 1989 IFLA Conference, the Section on Cataloguing adopted a schedule and established procedures for development and distribution of such documents as new or revised ISBDs.

Normally, initiation or revision of an ISBD will result from work accomplished by a Working Group appointed by the Section on Cataloguing's Standing Committee • sometimes in cooperation with other IFLA sections. In view of recent developments, it is well to stress here that it is the Section on Cataloguing which enjoys "ownership" of the ISBD program. Other Sections or groups which would like to propose new or revised ISBDs are not free to undertake such ventures on their own: they need to begin the process by communicating recommendations to Cataloguing. In any case, where desired format expertise is available elsewhere in other IFLA sections or in other organizations, the Standing Committee will seek to establish ISBD projects jointly.

To initiate an ISBD project, Cataloguing's Standing Committee appoints a chair and the membership of a Working Group to take responsibility for it. The Working Group is expected to generally conform with a overall schedule for the preparation, review, and publication of documents, which is set down at the beginning of every ISBD project. The time required to develop and revise the text will vary according to the complexity of issues to be resolved; normally projects take a minimum of two years to complete.

There are nine steps to accomplish between the start up and finish of an ISBD project.

1. Development of draft text
2. Duplication and distribution for worldwide review
3. Worldwide review and comment
4. Revision of draft text
5. Review by ISBD Review Group
6. Final revision
7. Duplication and distribution for voting
8. Voting by Standing Committee(s)
9. Final editing and publication of manuscript (print and electronic)

Regarding these steps, some further details are worth highlighting. First, any appointed Working Group is expected to work closely with the Director of the UBCIM Programme who is well prepared to help with the coordination of activities and provide procedural guidance. The Working Group is also expected to keep the Cataloguing Section and any other participating section well informed regarding the progress of their ISBD project. The membership of the standing committees sponsoring and participating sections participate in the worldwide review. In addition, also entitled to participate in the review are all association, institutional honorary and affiliate members of the Section on Cataloguing, and of any other sponsoring Section as well as members of the ISBD Review Group. Following the conclusion of a worldwide review, the chairperson of the Working Group, in consultation with the other members of the Working Group, is expected to consider all comments received and to revise the draft text accordingly. Nevertheless, the Working Group as a whole retains authority for deciding on the disposition of comments and determining the contents of the resulting text.

Once the Working Group is satisfied with the draft, it is forwarded to the chairperson of the ISBD Review Group to review it for general conformance to the overarching ISBD principles and particular conformance to the provisions of ISBD(G). This step is necessary to provide consistency across the entire "family of ISDBs", so that bibliographic records for different formats can be efficiently processed and integrated when desired into single databases. The chairperson of the Working Group next prepares a final text. At that point the new or revised ISBD is ready for balloting. If the majority vote is affirmative, the UBCIM Programme Director proceeds to establish arrangements for publication, both for purchase in print and freely available in an electronic version on IFLANET. Although procedures allow for negative vote - in which case, the chairperson of the Working Group will consult with the Standing Committee to determine what course of action to pursue - such an outcome has never occurred.

The procedures were established more than a decade before the advent of electronic communications which have made possible conducting business more efficiently on the Internet. Today, as is well known, it is easy to dispatch even long documents almost instantaneously to colleagues throughout much of the world and to exchange correspondence without the considerable delays often encountered when using postal systems for international mailing. It is also routine to mount a document on a web site and to conduct professional exchanges as members of electronic discussion networks. Contrast the advantages of today's "instantaneous" flow of messaging with the inefficiencies of the "manual" mode in terms of standardization processes! Implementation of the ISBD procedures had proved quite costly; for example, more than 400 copies of the proposed ISBD for Electronic Resources, a large document, had to be photocopied and mailed to destinations on every continent. In addition, because "snail" mail is often slow to reach its destination, the impact on the ISBD procedures resulted in six month periods for worldwide review for document delivery, evaluation, and return of comments. Even then replies often would continue to trickle in long after a particular group had finished evaluating the replies that were timely.

Thus, because of the economy which it provides, both in relation to postage saved and in terms of time saved in distributing documentation, the ISBD Review Group has become interested in modifying its procedures to take advantage of the internet. This explains why the Group decided experimentally to handle the recent proposal to update ISBD(M) by using the web as the primary vehicle for conducting the worldwide review. The changes were posted prominently on IFLANET and their availability for study and comment was announced on IFLANET and several other electronic lists. Since the proposed changes were considered likely not to be controversial the Group decided to set the review period at four months. The ISBD Review Group was thus able to have in hand at its August 2000 meeting the comments resulting from this review and to make final decisions regarding them at that time. This experiment was judged a success!

As a result, the Review Group has decided that henceforth all ISBD origination and update work should make use of the Internet, although a general mailing to the section membership will offer to continue hard-copy drafts sent via airmail to any members who certify lack of connectivity to the Internet. New or changed ISBDs will be posted to IFLANET and also be available upon request for e-mail transfer as textual attachments. The schedule for worldwide review will be adjusted to allow normally three to six months for study and comments. Early alerts will be posted to IFLANET and other e-lists so that groups could organize themselves for study and comment during the period allowed.

Thus, in this area, IFLA is undertaking to maximize the opportunities which today's technology offers by way of improving the interchange of information and views in its cataloguing standardization work. Not only will projects benefit from more timely development but also the technology will save considerable costs in terms of reproducing draft texts and purchasing their delivery.

Beyond these considerations, ISBD standardization procedures should be continuously reviewed to enable IFLA to maintain its cataloguing leadership, during what is now proving to be yet another transition period. Such standards as the ISBDs have guided the work of national cataloguing committees in updating their codes to foster internationally accepted practices. Today's publications patterns are changing, largely as a result of the electronic environment in which we increasingly function. As interest in metadata to promote control and access to electronic resources increases, the ISBDs will enjoy new opportunities to influence content and use of these schemes, since most of them will define data elements already familiar to the ISBDs. On the other hand, not only are there new bibliographic situations to consider, but not every bibliographic practice already in place continues to be as useful now as it was formerly.

The Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules (AACR) and the Regeln für die alphabetische Katalogisierung (RAK), to name but two of the world's most prominent cataloguing codes, are engaged on major revision projects. The challenge to IFLA is to be sure that these code revision projects continue to recognize the need and importance of international harmonization and do not unfold in isolation. The ISBD Review Group is well positioned to assist the Cataloguing Section in the area of bibliographic description by initiating communications with groups revising national cataloguing rules to seek their cooperation in maintaining an internationally acceptable framework. No doubt the national code revision projects will have many suggestions by way of improving the ISBDs, and IFLA should welcome this possibility as a means of ensuring the vitality of its own standards. Modern procedures for standards development and review will play a major role in enabling IFLA to meet this challenge.

Therefore, it is necessary for IFLA to maintain leadership in coordinating such projects with its own standardization efforts and to rekindle commitments of national libraries and national and multinational cataloguing committees to cooperation in maintaining bibliographic practices that will enable exchange of cataloguing data in the cost-effective manner which will benefit users throughout the world.

References

1 For a more detailed introduction to the ISBDs, see: Byrum, John, "The ISBD's: What They Are and How They Are Used" *International Cataloguing and Bibliographic Control* v. 23, no 4: 67-71 (Oct./Dec. 1994).

2 Available at <http://www.ifla.org/VII/s13/frbr/frbr.htm>

3 Available at <http://www.ifla.org/VI/3/nd1/isbdlist.htm>

4 Available at <http://www.ifla.org/>